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ABSTRACT

One of the few independent black schools in New England is Paige Academy, a school that is largely based on an African-centered pedagogy. Founded in 1975, the school was initially established as a day care center, and later expanded to include an elementary school, while retaining its infant and toddler day care. The Paige Academy now enrolls 150 students. Students take a variety of courses, including computer technology, English, history, social studies, and science. Another important aspect of Paige Academy is its emphasis on nutrition. The school uses an algae-based supplement and a vegetarian diet to improve the quality of children's nutrition and academic performance. In this interview Angela Paige Cook and Joe Cook, founders (with five other educators) of the academy discuss the establishment and development of the school and the ways in which they have been able to ensure that students at the Academy receive a quality education. These educators think that self-esteem is the main ingredient in preparing students to conquer challenges. Parents are required to participate and the school's teachers make home visits. The Paige Academy's educational philosophy is influenced by the Nguzo Saba, the seven principles of Kwanza. The emphasis is African-centered and multicultural, with three languages spoken daily (English, French, and Spanish). The vision of the educators at the Paige Academy is to make an impact on the African American and urban communities through their model of education in which the community decides what the standards ought to be. (SLD)

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by

Sandra M. Grayson

OCCASIONAL PAPER

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Occasional Paper No. 37

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by
Sandra M. Grayson

1996

This Occasional Paper is based on an interview conducted in the Spring of 1996 with Angela Paige Cook and Joe Cook, co-founders of Paige Academy, one of the few independent Black schools in New England. Sandra M. Grayson is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts.

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Foreword

Through the Occasional Paper Series, the William Monroe Trotter Institute is disseminating selected reports and papers based on research conducted under the auspices of the Institute. The analyses and conclusions contained in these articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions or endorsement of the Trotter Institute, or the University of Massachusetts Boston. This particular Occasional Paper, *Paige Academy—Continuing a Tradition of Academic Success in the Black Community: An Interview with Angela Paige Cook and Joe Cook*, is part of a series of reports examining facets of Black education in the United States.

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Introduction

The struggle for access to quality education has been an essential experience in the history of Black people in the United States. It was concern about the lack of educational opportunities for Black children that led Prince Hall, a free Black man and leading abolitionist, to write a petition in 1787 to the Senate and House of Representatives in Massachusetts requesting equal educational rights. He stated, in part:

> We are of the humble opinion that we have the right to enjoy the privileges of free men. But that we do not will appear in many instances, and we beg leave to mention one out of many, and that is of the education of our children which now receive no benefit from the free schools in the town of Boston, which we think is a great grievance, as by woful experience we now feel the want of a common education. We, therefore, must fear for our rising offspring to see them in ignorance in a land of gospel light when there is provision made for them as well as others and yet can't enjoy them, and for no other reason can be given this they are black. . . .[1]

Although the Massachusetts legislature denied Hall's petition, he continued to fight for equal rights for Blacks. Hall was born in Barbados in 1748 and went to Massachusetts when he was 17 years old. After serving in the Revolutionary War, he became a Methodist minister in Cambridge, and on May 6, 1787 he founded the Negro Masonic Order in the United States. In 1798, Hall established a home school in Boston for Black children.

Other antebellum independent schools were established by Black people such as George Bell, Nicholas Franklin, and Moses Liverpool, three former slaves who in 1807 in Washington, D.C. built the first schoolhouse for Black students.[2] In addition, Grace Bustill Douglass and James Forten started a private Black school in Philadelphia in 1819,[3] and Daniel Payne , a free Black man, opened a school for Black children in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1829.[4]

During the 1970s, four independent schools (Highland Park Free School, New School for Children, Free School, and Glenway Free School) flourished in the Black communities of Roxbury and Dorchester in Massachusetts. However, one by one, these schools closed after about 12 years in operation primarily due to lack of funding. Currently, one of the few independent Black schools in New England is Paige Academy, a school which is largely based on an African-centered pedagogy.[5]

Founded in 1975 by seven educators including Angela Paige Cook and Joe Cook, Paige Academy was initially established as a day-care center. It later expanded to include an elementary school. In 1994, 150 students were enrolled in pre-school through the sixth grade, and 200 others were on a waiting list at the Academy. Today, Paige Academy operates on full capacity with an enrollment of 150 students and occupies three neighboring homes on Highland Avenue in Roxbury, Massachusetts.

Students at Paige Academy take a variety of courses including computer technology, mathematics, English, history, social studies, and science. They also compete in academic contests such as the annual Boston Computer Society's Youth Compufest. In 1994, several Paige Academy students entered computer programs in Compufest. One of the students, Rafael Moses, entered a Nintendo-type martial art animation program and won second place. Other Paige students who won the 1994 contest include Kyle Johnson (1st place), Shamikah James (1st place), Shani James (1st place), and Sonni Johnson (2nd place).

Another important aspect of Paige Academy is its emphasis on nutrition. Wil C. Wade, Chairman of the Board of Corridor Economic Development Corporation (in Los Angeles, California), recently toured the school and noted that Paige Academy is one of a handful of schools that uses a type of food called Super Blue Green Algae to improve the quality of the children's nutrition and academic performance.

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The valuable work at Paige Academy has not gone unnoticed. In 1992, Joe Cook was honored by Terrific Teachers Making a Difference, a program which is administered by Chalesa Foundation in Aspen, Colorado and headed by Edward Chalesa, an entrepreneur who grew up in Boston. The program is "aimed at improving the self-esteem of students by encouraging teachers to solve educational dilemmas."[6] Each teacher receives a stipend from the foundation. In 1993, for their "vision, creativity, and leadership," Angela Paige Cook and Joe Cook were awarded the "Unsung Heroes Award" which included a $15,000 donation by an anonymous donor through the Philanthropic Initiative, Inc.[7] In addition, in 1994, the University of Massachusetts Boston awarded Angela Paige Cook the "Robert H. Quinn Award for Distinguished Community Service."

Angela Paige Cook has noted that poor economic and social conditions "have traditionally prompted African Americans to look to education, in the form of the integrated public school, as the most likely . . . route to the American Dream." However, over 40 years after the *Brown v. the Board of Education* case, "some African American educators and parents are asking themselves whether separate schools that put special emphasis on the needs of their children might be the most expedient way to ensure that they receive a quality education."[8] Paige Academy is an example of one such independent school. In the following interview, Angela Paige Cook and Joe Cook discuss the establishment and development of Paige Academy and the ways in which they have been able to ensure that students at the Academy receive a quality education.

Q: How would you describe Paige Academy?

APC: Paige Academy is an inner-city, independent community school located in Roxbury, Massachusetts. The school educates students ages 3 days to twelve years old and was founded by seven educators in 1975. The campus consists of three historic buildings and one toddler group which is located in a nearby elderly housing development. Each age group is housed in a different building with many shared spaces inside and outside. Students, from diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds, are drawn from 10 surrounding towns as well as the city of Boston.

Q: What was the original vision for Paige Academy?

APC: The seven original founders [Angela Paige Cook, Joe Cook, Kim Archung, Lauren Lee, Sandi Lieu, Elena Dodd, and Kayt Burrage] had a vision to create a holistic school environment that included these objectives:

(1) To provide an infant care program in as much of a family setting as can be artificially created.

(2) To involve parents actively, in an unpatronizing way, in the life of the school.

(3) To provide an environment that fosters individual worth as well as collective responsibility.

Q: How would you describe your job as director of Paige Academy?

APC: My job as director of an African-centered school is to ensure that we operate in a style that teaches without regard to the students' particular background in an environment that is conducive to learning, where teaching is an art rather than technical skill. We have teachers who believe that all of their students can succeed and who see themselves as a part of the community. Paige Academy's organizational context supports my continuing to do this kind of training with not only our teachers, who for the most part role model this type of teaching, but also to develop training for teachers outside our school.

Q: What do you see as advantages for students who attend Paige Academy?

APC: The students at Paige have a very strong sense of self. We think that self-esteem is the main ingredient in making children able to conquer anything. Our students feel comfortable doing science, math, the arts, music, and dance. The primary example of what students get out of coming here is that they have a strong sense of self so that when they leave they can feel comfortable doing anything that is requested of them.

JC: One other service that the school offers is a healthy environment and vegetarian diet. The students also get a lot of contact with adults, and they learn how to work with adults as well as with each other in completing projects. When anything happens at the school, the students are involved, whether it is an expansion project, fund-raising project, or a change in curriculum. We get the students' opinions and input. I believe they feel well-respected and loved, and they feel that they can talk to us [staff members] as though we are their parents. I think the students also see staff members working together and getting along in the school as well as in the community. This openness helps the development of their self-esteem and gives them the courage to get up on stage and talk about the intricacies of a computer project that they have just completed, to do a complicated drum rhythm, a dance, or whatever project with which they may be involved.

Q: How has the infant-toddler class at Paige Academy been able to establish a strong home/school connection?

APC: First, the parents are required to drop off and pick up their children so teachers have a brief time each day to make eye contact with the parents. Parents are requested to stay with their children in the morning and are asked to remain in the foyer when picking up a child. Second, all parents are required to attend monthly parent-teacher meetings and to participate in at least one *Ujima*, Collective Work and Responsibility, committee. Third, the home visit is also part of the home/school connection. The staff and administration of Paige Academy feel that it is very important to maintain an open flow of communication between family and school life.

The purpose of the home visit is for the teacher to become acquainted with the child in her/his most familiar environment—the home. A child's home is her/his garden and how s/he tends it allows one to better understand the child. Knowledge of the total child is essential in developing an individualized instructional program.

Parents are also asked to observe their child twice during the nine month school year and are invited to participate fully during the visit. Evaluations are also used throughout the school year. These and other school policies influence the home/school climate by establishing procedures and protocols that structure and build community.

Q: Describe the curriculum of Paige Academy for grades K-6.

APC: The students take a variety of courses in language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and computer science. One of the goals of the Academy is to develop the arts and sciences as a vital component of our curriculum. Also, we focus on teaching students about nutrition and the connections between diet and academic performance. The school offers the students a vegetarian diet.

Q: How does the school use the NGUZO SABA?

APC: Paige Academy's educational philosophy is influenced by the *NGUZO SABA*, seven principles of Kwanzaa. The family (children, parents, and staff) live and express the principles of:

UMOJA, unity—learning and working together in an atmosphere of love and respect for self and others;

KUJICHAGULIA, self-determination—helping build minds geared for positive movement and making dreams come true;

UJIMA, collective work and responsibility—struggling together to reach the goals we have set for ourselves and conquering all obstacles;

UJAMAA, cooperative economics—pulling together all of our resources to build a strong beautiful school both materially and ideologically;

NIA, purpose—developing and sustaining a positive direction in which to guide and lead our children;

KUUMBA, creativity—expanding and developing the creative potential inherent in all children; and

IMANI, faith—believing and having confidence in ourselves and our progress and knowing that together we can build strong minds to make for a brighter tomorrow.

Q: What qualities do you look for in a prospective teacher?

APC: I would consider Deborah Meier's "D" criteria an accurate model: "The qualities to look for in prospective teachers are (1) a self-conscious reflectiveness about how they themselves learn and [maybe even more] about how and when they don't learn; (2) a sympathy toward others, and appreciation of differences, and ability to imagine one's own 'otherness'; (3) a willingness, better yet a taste, for working collaboratively; (4) a passion for having others share some of one's own interest; and then (5) a lot of perseverance, energy, and devotion to getting things right!"[9]

Q: What is the "teacher-in-service" process at Paige Academy?

APC: Many of our teachers come to us with a lot of training. We also have teachers from all over the world (including Mali, Senegal, Haiti, and Puerto Rico) which I think adds a lot of diversity in terms of their cultural input. There are three languages that the children and the teachers speak on a daily basis (English, French, and Spanish), and we try to help teachers feel that whatever they bring to the school from their own culture is welcome. All of the head teachers have degrees in early childhood education if they work with young children or elementary education if they work in the elementary school.

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The focus of the training during the first weeks of school is on Paige Academy's philosophies and procedures. We also pay 50 percent of the tuition for anyone who wants to go to college. We have trained hundreds of people, and other institutions that can pay more money recruit our teachers. The minimum time that people stay with us is seven years. At some point, folks need to make more money, so we lose them to a larger institution, a situation which has been difficult for us. However, we feel they have given so much to us. We have also given to them because they have gotten their degrees. In fact, one person who had not worked in early childhood education came to work for Paige Academy and now is director of a school in Cambridge.

JC: The other thing that is exciting about working for Paige is the diversity of the level of skills. We have Ph.D.s working with people from the community who just have experience, and they get along. They are not afraid of one person being "degreed" and another person not. The seven principles of Kwanzaa are the same for all people no matter what degree held, race, creed, or religion. It's exciting because teachers teach each other as well as learn from the students. Also, there is an openness to many cultures and languages at the Academy.

Q: In one of your essays, you noted that multilingual, multicultural teacher's "natural ability and instincts engage" their students and the parents as partners. Can you elaborate on this idea?

APC: It is clear to me through observations, interviews, and my general understanding of the multilingual and multicultural abilities of infant-toddler teachers that their natural abilities and instincts engage the parents and their students as partners. These teachers talk their talk, walk their walk as well as dress, hear, and interpret information in the same way. This repertoire of diverse lifestyles supports and encourages parents especially the younger teen parents who represent more than 50 percent of the infant-toddler class' parent body. The life experiences of the teaching staff enhance the learning and exchanges between teachers and parent, teachers and children, and among the teachers with one another.

Q: What components do you view as essential in constructing a positive urban school culture and experience?

APC: When schools support their culture as an integral part of the school experience, students can understand that academic excellence is not the sole province of white middle-class students. My goal is to continue to develop a school where students achieve academic success and maintain a positive identity. I want to continue to train teachers in the art of excellent teaching. I believe that a pedagogy that is culturally relevant empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Q: I would like to go back to the beginning of the interview where you talked about the original vision for Paige Academy. How has your vision for Paige Academy changed over the past 20 years?

APC: The main aspect of Paige that has evolved is the elementary school. At the time of that original vision statement, we only had the day-care center. We ended up adding one grade each year. Many people wanted us to add a high school, but we decided to stop at 6th grade.

In terms of where we started and where we have been, we just got bigger and more complex, we try to keep a handle on that so we don't get unmanageable. There is a demand on us to continue to grow. However, we want to make sure that we maintain a sense of community and family. I think that community building is a delicate art. Another one of our goals is to be institutionalized so that when Joe and I are no longer involved with the Academy, it will still be viable. No Black institutions in Boston have survived past their founders, and we do not want that to happen to Paige.

JC: We have evolved in the community as well. We have a good relationship with a lot of grassroots organizations. We always wonder where our support is, and I think that we have entrenched ourselves in this community. We have been able to write proposals that have been successfully funded by dominant culture controllers. Also, we have applied to the pilot school program through the Boston Public School System. I think they like what we are doing here. They haven't worked out all of the conflicts, but I could foresee Paige Academy coming more closely akin to the public school system as we evolve and that will allow more students to experience Paige Academy. Our vision has been to impact the African-American community with the idea of excellent education where the community can decide what those standards ought to be. I feel we are making that impact on the community and the city. I think that we offer some form of empowerment and refuge in this community.

Q: Where do you see Paige Academy in the future?

APC: We would like to see Paige Academy become a pilot school which we will probably be able to accomplish in September 1997. Also, part of a 10-year plan that Joe and I made six years ago was to complete doctorates; we are both in graduate school and should graduate in 1999.

Q: Having established your vision for Paige and where you see the Academy in the future, what obstacles will you have to overcome and what goals will you need to accomplish to reach that mark?

APC: The main obstacle is money. Even though I can say, "Okay, God is going to provide for us," the inspectors come here, and they can say, "If you do not build X and do Z, you are closed." Hence, we are always trying to get money to do the necessary things to stay open. It is a struggle because

I have to write proposals all of the time, represent the proposals, and convince people that what we are doing is viable. Another obstacle is having the energy to keep going; diet is especially important for me because I have to have a lot of energy to do this.

JC: Alumni involvement is extremely important. I believe that alumni support is going to enable us to build. There are many Paige graduates who are doing well; they come back, see us, and always offer their help. I think being a young school and not having that kind of alumni support in the early days and even now made it difficult to be 100 percent. The alumni help us now in the ways that they can, and I believe that when they get financially stable they will also help financially. One thing we are trying to do now is to rally the alumni and the people and families who have been a part of Paige. We are finding these people now, reaching out, and putting them in our database, actions which are making quite a difference.

Endnotes

1. Prince Hall, "Petition to the State Legislature, October 17, 1787" in Herbert Aptheker (ed.), *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States Volume 1* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1951), pp. 19-20.

2. Tom Cowan and Jack Maguire, *Timelines of African-American History* (New York: Perigee Books, 1994).

3. Sylvia G. L. Dannett, *Profiles of Negro Womanhood* (Chicago, IL: Educational Heritage, Inc., 1964).

4. Cowan and Maguire, *Timelines of African-American History*, op. cit., p. 57.

5. According to the Institute for Independent Education in Washington, D.C., there are about 11 Black independent schools in New England.

6. "Foundation Honors 52 Teachers in Massachusetts," *The Boston Globe*, September 1, 1992.

7. David Nyhan, "An Anonymous Champion of the Unsung Heroes," *The Boston Globe*, February 9, 1993.

8. Angela Paige Cook, *Reflections Week 3: Leadership Workshop*. Unpublished essay.

9. Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995).

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